



Protestant Monasticism

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Surely our age will be marked by future historians as one dedicated to Christian unity. The recognition of the scandal of divided Christianity and the trend toward reunion began within Protestant circles at the turn of the Century, and was concretized in the founding of the World Council of Churches at mid-Century. The Catholic Church officially entered the movement ten years later with the announcement and convocation of the Second Vatican Council, dedicated to the re-uniting of the Body of Christ.

One of the more noteworthy Protestant movements toward unity has been the founding in Europe of several monasteries, whose members are specifically dedicated to that cause.

At first sight, that seems to be a contradiction. Martin Luther, the Father of Christian separation, began to try ridding the world of Monasteries when in 1517 he tacked his ninety-five theses to the door of Witten-

berg's Church of All Saints. In 1521, the year after his excommunication, he published his *De votis monasticis Martini Lutherii iudicium*. This treatise states his position on monasticism in general, and on the monastic vows in particular.

As François Biot points out,¹ the basic reason for Luther's rejection of monastic vows seems to have been his unique religious intuition. His reasoning can be expressed as follows:

God alone is holy, and is the only source of holiness.

A participated holiness exists solely in and through Christ, who is the only way of reaching salvation, the fruit of holiness. Salvation is given to men through God's works achieved in Christ.

For his part, man must accept the salvation thus given, be clothed with it. He does this through faith, and faith alone, solemnized in baptism. Baptism, God's gift of salvation, is for man a pledging of himself to evangelical life: a life of spiritual poverty, of brotherly submission to all, of marital fidelity.

The vows, and monastic life lived under them, it seemed to Luther, rejected this structure of salvation:

Monastic life implies a source of holiness in creatures.

Monastic life establishes a system of ways *other than Christ* for reaching salvation.

Monastic life puts the works of the vows and the Rule in the place of faith, or above it. The vows themselves destroy evangelical liberty, freedom of conscience, which is not bound to any human work.

Thirty-eight years later, in 1559, John Calvin published the seventh and last Latin edition of his *Institutes*. It is in this edition, Book IV, Chapter 13, that his opinions on monastic vows found their fullest treatment.

According to Calvin, the lawfulness of the vows ought to be judged according to, among others, the following criteria:

A vow must be of something pleasing to God, for it is a promise made to him.

A vow must be of something within the power of the one promising.

For Calvin, a vow is not pleasing to God. For the services we ourselves have invented to please God are vain. In fact, they are abominated in several places in Scripture.

Nor are the vows within the power of the one promising. The vow

¹ François Biot, *The Rise of Protestant Monasticism*, (Baltimore: Helicon Press, Inc., 1963), pp. 26, 32, with permission.

of chastity, at least, is unlawful for it consists in promising something of which man is incapable without a special call from God. Moreover, it implies a certain contempt of man's God-given freedom to marry.

Calvin recognized the possibility of a special call from God to the state of celibacy. But he thought this call could be only a temporary one, and could not form the basis for a perpetual vow. The vow of chastity is therefore to be especially rejected, for it is made rashly by those who have not the power to keep it.

The Monks' greatest evil, however, for Luther, as well as for Calvin, lay in considering their form of life a state of perfection. By their profession, asserted Calvin, which they consider a second baptism, they separate themselves from the Church. Having a rule of behavior of their own, they wish to receive the sacraments separately, thereby cutting themselves off from the fellowship of the faithful.

Common, then, to both Luther and Calvin, and to most of the other reformers, is the rejection of the vows on the grounds of their indignity, disservice and impossibility. Given the thesis that salvation comes through faith alone, and that man cannot, because of the baseness of his nature, be elevated above the purely natural level, the conclusion follows.

But today there are Protestant men and women who have bound themselves to serve God and neighbor in the monastic state. They have solemnly promised to obey a superior, to practice evangelical community of goods, and to embrace the chastity of celibacy.

So, on the one hand we have the authority of the reformers affirming the wickedness of monastic vows and life. On the other, we have several examples of Protestant communities living the form of life the reformers so vigorously forbade. How is this dilemma to be resolved? There is no point in arguing against the position of the reformers. For, a look at the life of a Protestant monastery will show far better than theological argument that such a life is not only possible and useful, but also very necessary.

There are several Protestant monasteries in Europe, and a Lutheran, Father Arthur Kreinheder, is trying to start one near Oxford, Michigan. The most successful example, however, is the monastery wholly dedicated to the cause of Christian unity. Its members, although representing several Protestant Confessions—notably the Lutheran and the Calvinist—live in the unity of monastic life. For, they are convinced that the monastic community is ideally suited for continuing from generation to generation the effort of re-uniting Christianity.

The Community of Taizé began in 1940 when Roger Schutz and a group of companions began to gather regularly for communal worship. In 1944 the group purchased property, began full-time community living, and became the most stable, if not the first, Protestant monastic community since the Reformation.

Common service of Christ is the aim of the Community. It is an active service, vitalized by contemplative prayer. Searching for unity among Christians, and seeking to serve at the nerve centers of human life, the Monks of Taizé draw their strength from their three daily offices, and from the celebration of the Eucharist. The morning and evening offices resemble Lauds and Vespers. All liturgical prayer is in French and the texts have been chosen out of the treasury of the Church of all times and all places. The psalmody is that of Fr. Joseph Gelineau, S.J.

Between the morning and the evening office there is the work day. While some of the Monks remain at Taizé, studying Theology, directing spiritual retreats, and managing the farm, many others go out to nearby cities, bringing their witness of Christ to the marketplace:

We must strive for a Christian engagement in the human society around us. We must discover in our own field, in our place of work, the means of radiating—perhaps without a word—the presence of Christ. For, you must accept a man where you find him, how you find him, in order to enter into his humanity and understand him from within.²

The spirituality of Taizé is "athletic," according to Prior Schutz:

If there is a spirituality of Taizé it consists in nothing other than the desire to 'run' according to the counsel of St. Paul. To run together and no longer alone, this means abandoning a search for a purely individual salvation in order to seek the salvation of all.³

The life of Taizé is truly monastic. The community lives according to the Rule of Taizé, composed by Roger Schutz. Reminiscent of the Rules of St. Benedict and St. Augustine, the Rule of Taizé is very modern. It can be summed up in the words: Pray and work that Christ may reign. This embraces three principles:

² Roger Schutz, *Living Today For God*, (Baltimore: Helicon Press, Inc., 1962) pg. 66, with permission.

³ Schutz, pg. 91.

Throughout your day, let work and rest be quickened by the Word of God.

Maintain inward silence in all things, in order to dwell in Christ.

Become filled with the spirit of the Beatitudes: joy, simplicity, mercy. (Rule of Taizé)⁴

The three monastic vows, professed during the Easter vigil, are seen as signs for our time:

To help us remain faithful in this service of God, there have been given us three great signs which constantly recall the absolute character of our vocation. By them we belong to the great family of monasticism.⁵



Obedience, chastity, poverty—each is necessary for the Monk. The principle of authority, practiced in a community through the vow of obedience, corresponds to a practical need for unity: "There is no hope of a bold and total service of Jesus Christ without unity of mind." (Rule of Taizé)

The purpose of the vow of obedience is to release the Monk from useless shackles so that the responsibilities of the ministry may be better fulfilled. Living according to a Rule makes easier the resolving of the tension between the total freedom given by the Holy Spirit, and the difficulties imposed by fallen nature.

⁴ *The Rule of Taizé* is published and available at Packard Manse, Staughton, Mass. Quoted with permission.

⁵ Schutz, pg. 92

Obedience to the Prior is necessary, for he is the focal point of the community's oneness. He scrutinizes the designs of God, with the help of the Council of professed Brothers, and makes the practical judgment.

The vow of chastity was the great concern of Luther and Calvin. At Taizé, chastity is embraced on the strength of Christ's promise: "He who leaves father, mother, wife, children, . . . will receive a hundred-fold in this world and life everlasting in the next."

Celibacy leaves one free to concern himself with the things of God. For the Brother of Taizé, the things of God are at once the things of neighbor in the love of Christ:

Our celibacy means neither breaking with human affections, nor indifference, but calls for the transformation of our natural love. Only Christ converts the passions into total love for one's neighbor. (Rule of Taizé)

Prior Schutz explains the possibility of celibacy, as if to set aside the fears of the reformers:

The chastity of celibacy is possible only because of Christ and Gospel. For all those who have entered the great family of monasticism, the final commitment to celibacy manifests their desire to become men of a single love. The monastic vocation implies for the man who accepts it a certain solitude with God. Committed to a true love of the unseen God without hating the men whom he sees, the man who lives such a calling feeds his capacity for love at the unique source, Christ himself. Through the chastity of celibacy he tends to become a man of a single love.

The reformers saw the vow of chastity as a limiting of the freedom of the Holy Spirit. Prior Schutz' answer to this objection is final:

But in such reasoning are we not posing restrictions on the freedom of God merely to keep from committing ourselves, as though God were not free and powerful enough to make known his call?⁶

Poverty is simply the getting rid of non-essentials which might encumber the evangelical life:

Poverty has no virtue in itself. The poor according to the Gospel learn to live without the assurance of the morrow, in

⁶ Schutz, pp. 95, 99.

joyous confidence that they will lack for nothing. The spirit of poverty does not consist in making oneself look poor, but in setting everything in the simple beauty of creation. The spirit of poverty is to live in the gladness of today. If God gives gratuitously the good things of the earth, it is blessed for man to give that which he has received. (The Rule of Taizé)

Divided Christianity is a scandal which can no longer be tolerated. Taizé is an ecumenical community. Its members live their form of life that they might be signs of brotherly love among men. They can never be resolved to separation, but must be consumed with burning zeal for the unity of the Body of Christ.

For our part, we refuse to allow ourselves to be enclosed in a complacent confessional conscience and are seeking according to our means to open a breach in the barriers which separate Christians. Such a mission requires a continuity from generation to generation and a loving patience. A monastic community is ideally equipped for such a continuity, whatever waves of enthusiasm or doubt may break around it for or against ecumenism.⁷

A monastic community is ideally suited for such a mission. . . . For, its base is the stable foundation of the common life: community prayer, community dedication, community service. This life is difficult, but the rewards are great. The Brothers of the Community of Taizé are disciples of the Reform, not of the reformers. For the reformers excluded themselves from the very society they sought to reform. And instead of reforming it, they divided it. And if the sixteenth century reformers did not realize what a great instrument they rejected, the twentieth century disciples of the reform do realize its value, and have taken it up, and are applying it to the wounded Body of Christ "That they all may be one . . ."

⁷ Schutz, pg. 89.